

Feast of Tabernacles

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[0 : 0 0] Do you like camping? As I scan the congregation, I can see one or two who do like camping. I'll be honest, I really don't get camping at all. I just don't get it. It's fine if you do and you enjoy it, great. Enjoy it away, but I just don't get it. Why would anybody willingly deprive themselves of a roof over their head, a proper bed, an ensuite shower? I just don't get it.

But hey, if you want to go camping, you go camping. Now, for any Israelite of a similarly unadventurous disposition as myself, the Feast of Tabernacles was not great news. The feast that we've read of required of the Israelites, all the Israelites, to go camping. That's effectively what they did for those seven days, to build and live in a booth or tent for the time indicated. Seven days, sometimes you read it and it says seven, then there's a reference to an eighth day and it's not altogether clear, but roughly seven days that they lived in this tent that they had made. Now, I'm sure the kids loved it. You can almost imagine, you know, when you think of the festival, the yearly festival, and the first day of the seventh month was the Feast of Trumpets, and that was a feast that really was involved in calling people to what lay ahead. And a few days later, there was the Day of Atonement, and I could just imagine the kids thinking, ah, it's the Feast of Tabernacles coming, and they'd be excited. You know, one of them would be saying, my dad makes a better booth than your dad. And he said, no, my dad makes the best booth. And you can just imagine the excitement that was generated for everybody, but I would imagine especially for the kids, as this feast came ever nearer. Now, as we want to think about this feast, and we want to think about its significance, we want to think about its relevance for us today, what can we learn from this feast that seems so far removed from our own reality? And of course, it is very far removed from us in time. And in trying to establish the significance of it, we're going to do four things briefly. We're going to examine the original instructions. That won't take long. It's simply what we've read there in Leviticus. But then we're going to explore its development in time, because this feast, not unlike some of the others, developed in time in terms of the ritual associated with it. And we're going to just focus in on one aspect of that development in time in the history of the people of Israel leading up and including the New Testament. So, we're going to notice the original instructions, explore its development in time, but then also marvel at its fulfillment in Christ. And for that, we'll turn to the verses that we've read there in John's Gospel and make the connection between this feast and what Jesus said on that occasion that we read a few moments ago. And then finally, just notice and identify the enduring challenge of this feast for us today, even if we don't participate in it in the manner in which the Israelites were required to, nonetheless, the challenge that remains for us. So, let's go through this in the way that I've suggested. First of all, the original instructions. What we've read, the passage, the passage, and there we find some of what the Israelites were required to do. We noticed there that the feast involved a sacred assembly at the beginning of the festival, and then on the first day and also on the final day, where all the people gathered together, involved offerings of one kind and another. We won't go into the details of those. There was the gathering of the harvest fruit, and, you know, you have even the reference there to the fruit that would be gathered. It was a time of harvest. It was the second harvest. The barley harvest had taken place at the beginning of the year, and now we have this harvest, a second harvest of other crops. And some of those were to be gathered together to be involved or to be used in this, in the festivities. And then the most intriguing element, or maybe in some ways the central element, what distinguishes this feast from all the others, is the instruction to live in booths or tents. And we have that described for us there in verses 42 and 43. live in booths or tents for seven days. And then it goes on to describe who are going to do so. So, that's what was involved in celebrating this festival. And what is also clear, and we have it before us clearly stated in the text, is the purpose of it all. And the purpose is also fairly clear. The festival was

an occasion for grateful celebration of God's provision in the past. And there the booths, of course, help to remind the people of the wilderness experience. And that's stated very explicitly in verse 43. Why live in booths? Why this strange requirement that was laid upon the Israelites? So that your descendants will know that I made the Israelites live in booths when I brought them out of Egypt. The first generation, they didn't need to be reminded, but subsequent generations did need to be reminded. And rather than simply be told by means of story and account, God determined that they would actually have the experience of living in these booths for a whole week as a very vivid reminder for all the people of what God had done, how God had rescued them, and how God had provided for them in the wilderness. So it was a time of grateful celebration for God's provision in the past, but also in the present. It was a harvest festival, and part of its purpose was to acknowledge God's provision in the immediately preceding months. Indeed, there's reference there to the gathering of the crops there in verse 39. So beginning with the 15th day of the seventh month, after you have gathered the crops of the land, celebrate the festival to the Lord. So they were looking back, obviously as time passed, they would be looking back over decades or centuries to God's provision in the wilderness, but also to His provision in that present time. They just gathered the harvest, and so that was also a visible and vivid reminder of God's goodness and generosity. One other thing we can say about the original instructions that is very clear, I don't know if you would say that this is an instruction or simply a feature of the festival, is that it was marked, perhaps more than any other, by overwhelming joy and celebration. It was intended to be a joyful celebration. Others of the festivals were very solemn in their nature, the day of atonement, for obvious reasons. It was a very solemn festival. It's not to say that there wasn't any joy, but it was marked more by solemnity and the Passover equally in great measure, but this was a festival that was to be marked by joy, celebration, big-time celebration, the final festival of the calendar, and it was to be one that was to be enjoyed and to be celebrated by the people.

So that's really what we have there in the verses that we've read. But then I want to move on and just touch on what I'm calling its development in time. We have that with a number of the festivals. We read what is said about them in Leviticus, and you have this description of them, but then you discover that with the passage of time, many of them evolved, I suppose you could say, and additional elements or rituals became part of the festivals. Now, that in itself is something that maybe is something we ask, well, is that a good thing? Should that have happened? And on another occasion, I can't remember when it was, I made the distinction between that which is extra-biblical and that which is unbiblical.

[8 : 47] And the distinction really is intended to acknowledge that in this development of the festivals and new rituals that were incorporated, in the measure that they were true to its original purpose, they could be helpful. They weren't going against what God had instructed, but they added new elements.

Of course, we don't know how that happened. Maybe there was a time at which God so directed, and it's not recorded for us. It seems unlikely. But in the measure that they were true to the original purpose, they seemed to have been helpful for the people, and they certainly became part of the celebration. And that happened with this festival, with the Feast of Tabernacles. And it did so in a number of ways, but we're going to focus on one way only, because it serves our purpose. And the one development that in time, and again, it's difficult to know when this happened, but at some point, subsequent to the original instructions, an additional ceremony was introduced. And the one that we want to mention is what was known as the water-pouring ceremony. Now, the origin of that ceremony is to be found in the original purpose of the feast, thankfulness for God's provision in the wilderness, and very specifically, His provision of water. The Israelites remembered how God, in a miraculous way, provided water for them in the wilderness. And of course, that was on more than one occasion, but perhaps the occasion that the Israelites would have had particularly in mind is the occasion that we have recorded in Exodus chapter 17, from the beginning of the chapter.

And we won't read all the verses, but we simply direct you to that chapter and remind you of how, on that occasion, God miraculously provided water from the rock for a people who needed that water in order to survive. And the water-pouring ceremony, it would seem, was intended to help the Israelites remember that particular aspect of God's provision. And what did the ceremony consist of? What did it involve? Well, in rough outline, the ceremony involved the priest, one of the priests, accompanied by the worshipers and musicians, heading from the temple in Jerusalem to the pool of Siloam, to the southeast of the city. And the priest would go and lead this procession, you might

say, of worshipers carrying two golden pitchers. One of them was filled with wine, and one of them was to be filled with water from the pool of Siloam. So the priest would arrive there, he would fill that second pitcher with water, and then the priest and all those accompanying him would return to the temple. And when he arrived at the temple, he would approach the altar. There at the altar, there were two silver basins. In one of them, the wine would be poured, the wine there, a reminder of God's provision of the harvest. The great harvest coincided with this festival. But then the other one, the water that he'd gathered up at the pool of Siloam, it also would be poured into one of the basins there at the altar. And that was what the ceremony consisted of. And the whole scene, the whole procession from the temple to the pool and returning to the temple, if you needed to compare it to something, to give it some, to visualize it, probably it could be best compared to a carnival. There was music and singing and dancing and celebration as the priests and the worshipers and the musicians would make their way to the pool and return to the temple. One rabbi describing this scene much later than the times that we're reading of, but he said this of this ceremony, anyone who has not seen the water ceremony has never seen rejoicing in this life. And that captures, I think, the mood of this ceremony.

But there's one intriguing detail that I want you to take a clear mental note on. And that is that the water ceremony was performed on every day of the Feast of Tabernacles, for eight days, on every day, with the exception of the final day. On the final day, the ceremony was not performed. And the question that arises, well, why not? Why on the final day, the day in which the feast culminated, why would you not include the ceremony? You might imagine that would be the day when you would most anticipate that it would be present. Well, seemingly, the reason for its absence in the final day was that this was a reminder to the people that the water miraculously provided by God in the wilderness, from the rock, pointed forward to water of a different nature and quality, living water that can satisfy spiritual thirst. And the absence of the ceremony in the final day was a reminder that this water had not yet been provided. There was this absence, and it was as if to say, no, this water that we look forward to, it is yet to come. We thank God for the provision of water in the past, but there is a greater water, but it is yet to come. And the absence of the ceremony in the final day was intended to point in that direction. And of course, throughout the Old Testament, there is a messianic thread that weaves through the prophets concerning living water, concerning this water that satisfies spiritual thirst. And it's not our purpose this evening to make our way through that thread or identify that thread in any significant measure. But let's just notice a couple of occasions where we can pick up on that thread in the prophet Isaiah in chapter 44 and in verse 3, we read as follows, for I, Isaiah 44 and verse 3, for I will pour water on the thirsty land and streams on the dry ground. I will pour out my spirit on your offspring and my blessing on your descendants. We're just jumping in rather brusquely into the chapter, but there you have this picture of a future day, a day when God would act in this way, when He would bless in a way, and He illustrates the blessing by this theme of pouring water on the thirsty land and the parallel being with the pouring of God's Spirit on His people. A similar theme or the same theme is picked up by the prophet Ezekiel in chapter 47. It's really the whole section of that chapter, but we can just summarize the content of it. In chapter 47 of

[16:24] Ezekiel, there's this vision that Ezekiel is given, and the vision that he's given is of the temple in Jerusalem, but from that temple, a stream beginning to flow begins as a trickle, but then it grows in volume as it flows from the city. There's a reference to it going into the Dead Sea and making the stagnant water fresh and of volume. And then it continues, and it continues in different directions from Jerusalem, this living water going towards the nations. And then one final reference in terms of this thread in the Old Testament prophets in Zechariah and chapter 14. There it's interesting and particularly interesting for us because there's a connection that is made in the prophet Zechariah to the Feast of Tabernacles very explicitly. But in Zechariah chapter 14 in verse 8, we read, and again, the picture is of a future day of God's blessing. And we read, on that day, living water will flow out from Jerusalem half to the Eastern Sea and half to the Western Sea in summer and in winter. Jerusalem as the source of living water for the world, for the nations. And as I say, the intriguing element to the Zechariah reference is that in a subsequent verse in verse 16, there is this specific reference to the Feast of Tabernacles.

We read there in verse 16 of the final chapter of Zechariah, then the survivors from all the nations that have attacked Jerusalem will go up year after year to worship the King, the Lord Almighty, and to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles. So the water associated with that feast, the water God

provided in the wilderness, the water He provided year by year to ensure the harvests, and then this looking forward to living water. And that water pouring ceremony, to get back there, had this intriguing aspect that the final day, the ceremony did not take place, reminding the people that there was this long-awaited living water still to be enjoyed.

So, to bring things to a head, what or who is anticipated by the water mysteriously absent from the last day of the feast and spoken of by the prophets? Well, that takes us to its fulfillment, the fulfillment of the feast in the person of Jesus. Now, sometimes in the task of identifying the fulfillment of a given feast or ritual, we need to engage in a measure of informed speculation. It's not always immediately evident, the links and the connections. Not so with the Feast of Tabernacles. The fulfillment of the feast is recorded with unambiguous precision in John chapter 7, the verses that we read just a few moments ago. Then in John chapter 7, at the beginning of the chapter, we didn't read from there, you have the feast and the day that the events that are recorded taking place identified. So, in chapter 7 of

John and in verse 2, we are told very clearly, but when the Jewish feast of Tabernacles was near, identified very clearly. Then in verse 10, we're told that Jesus, despite the evident danger that he was in, which is the reason for his reluctance or seeming reluctance to even participate, we then read in verse 10, however, after his brothers had left for the feast, he, that is Jesus, went also, not publicly, but in secret, to the Feast of Tabernacles. He made his way to Jerusalem to be there for the Feast of Tabernacles to participate with the other worshipers in the manner that we've described. And then in verse 37, we did read that verse, the very first thing that we read there in verse 37 is, on the last and greatest day of the feast. So, what Jesus then goes on to say, and take careful note of that, he says, on the last and greatest day of the feast. And what have we just said about that last day? What didn't take place on that last day? The water pouring ceremony. On that day, it didn't take place. No picture with water, no water poured on the altar. And it is on that day, the final and great day of the

Feast of Tabernacles, that Jesus declares what he declares. And what does he declare? Well, we've read the words there in verse 37, if anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him. Now, even with a passing understanding of the background to the feast and all that we've seen, you see the huge significance of what Jesus is saying at that precise moment and occasion. The words in themselves are wonderful. We could draw a lot from them without knowing any of the background. But when we appreciate that background of the feast and the day, the very day when the water wasn't poured, and Jesus says, I am the one who can satisfy those who are thirsty. If you're thirsty, come to me. No, there's no pitcher, no water poured today, but come to me. If you're thirsty, I can satisfy you. I can provide living water. All that you've learned of what Isaiah said and Ezekiel said and Zechariah said of a day when living water would flow from Jerusalem, from the temple. Well, here we are in the temple, and here I am. If you're thirsty, come to me. If you're thirsty, come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from me. So Jesus declares in this dramatic way who he is and what he fulfills. He identifies himself as God's rock in the wilderness,

[22 : 37] God's ultimate miraculous provision for his people. He identifies himself as the source of the long awaited eight-day living water. And this is water that all can drink and be satisfied.

And Jesus also is anticipating, as John explains, the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of all who respond to his invitation to drink of him, to believe in him. And so this feast fulfilled in this dramatic way, in this very telling way, in this very wonderful way, in the person of Jesus and all that he declares concerning himself. But then finally, let's just close by noticing the enduring challenge of this feast. And I think the enduring challenge of it is captured in an Old Testament passage that it was customary to read in connection with the water-pouring ceremony that we've focused a bit of attention on this evening. And the passage that was read, or certainly one of the passages that was read during the feast in connection with that ceremony, is in Isaiah chapter 12 and verse 3. And as I read it, you'll identify the obvious reason for it being chosen. There the prophet declares, with joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. This feast marked by joy and celebration, a feast when this was declared. Again, looking forward to a future day when well would be drunk, not from a physical well, but from the wells of salvation. With joy you will draw that water.

And the enduring challenge for us today is that we would ever draw from that well, that you would draw for yourself. Come and drink all that God has provided in the person of his Son Jesus. Drink

and be satisfied. Drink and be refreshed. Drink and be invigorated. Draw for yourself, but also draw for others. The picture that Jesus paints there in the verses we read in John chapter 7, this picture of streams of living water, is a reminder that the Spirit's work in the lives of those who drink of Jesus is for the benefit of others. God's purpose is not exhausted when our thirst is satisfied, but only when we, when you and me, who drink of Jesus by our lives, bring life and refreshment to others. So, we drink, and as we drink, so from us streams of living water flowing to others. Well, may that be true of us, even in this week that is beginning. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your Word. We thank you for the Bible. We thank you that it speaks of Jesus. We thank you how it was true when Jesus walked with the disciples on the road to Emmaus, how he was able to take them through the Old Testament and identify for them. And we thank you that we can do the same, not with the same knowledge, and yet as you help us and as you direct us. So, identify Jesus. And these passages that may seem very strange to us, very bizarre in many ways, so, so alien to our own day-to-day experience.

We do thank you for Jesus. We thank you that he is the one who satisfies, the one who satisfies our spiritual thirst. And we pray that we would ever drink of him. And as we do, so it would be true of us in our lives that streams of living water would flow from us for the blessing and refreshment of others. And these things we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.